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Exactly What You Don't Want to Hear

John 6:1-21

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Every so often, one of you comes up to me and asks why we are singing a particular hymn, or why we are not singing some other hymns. I appreciate these questions probably more than the person who asks them because they usually get the typical long-winded Pastor Tom answer. As many of you know, I tend to over-answer questions.

The rationale in hymn selection is two fold. We try to key the hymns to the Scripture for the day, or at least to the general theme of the sermon. But we also try to take into account what you like in your hymns. We ask ourselves, 'Do they like to sing this hymn?' This is important as well, because a hymn which no one likes to sing isn't able to lift us emotionally as a component part of our worship service.

But, you know, we rarely ask an even more basic question: Does God like this hymn? Don't assume that God likes all hymns. I do say, especially at memorial services where we typically have many people who are not normally in a hymn singing church on Sunday mornings, that what God really enjoys is people who make a joyful noise, that people don't have to be accomplished in their hymn singing. Yet, I don't know if Jesus likes all hymns. There are some hymns with some pretty silly theology. There are some praise choruses that are sickly sweet and me-oriented.

But I note from my recent preaching in the gospel of John that Jesus seems to have driven away about as many people as he attracted. And maybe that tells us something. I mean, Jesus seems to have based his ministry on more substantial questions than, "Do the people like what I have to say?"

Today's Scripture is a story about Jesus, but first it's a story about a crowd. In verse 2 John says that a 'large crowd, a multitude, kept following him.' Is this a sign of success? Who can argue with numbers? Look at the bottom line - a large crowd, Jesus has become popular.

Then John tells us why they are following Jesus. They saw the signs he was doing for the sick, the diseased. Jesus has brought to people that to which we give the largest portion of our gross national product ... health care. Great crowds are following Jesus because they see his signs. He heals them. He meets their needs.

Curiously, he does not continue to meet their needs. In verse 3, he goes up to the mountain. He hangs there for awhile with his followers and then looks to see the same crowd, the multitude, coming up the mountain toward him. So begins the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Now, this morning I don't want to focus on this miracle per se, though there are some great insights here that really apply to our daily lives. What I want to do instead is summarize the feeding. Jesus sees the people, Jesus understands their needs, and Jesus meets their needs.

And, really, that's the pull for most of us to be here this morning, right? We are here hoping to have our needs met by Jesus. But wait a minute! The story doesn't really end with the feeding. At the end of the story, Jesus is acclaimed as a great prophet. THEN the people want to "take him by force and make him king." Get that? *Take him by force and make him king!*

The people need bread. Jesus gives them bread. They acclaim him as king. What else does Jesus want? I mean, if I had five thousand people wanting to come to this church every week I would be jazzed! That's be maybe 20 times our attendance, and I would be a really big shot pastor and that would be very cool. So, what's Jesus want?

You have to go back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry to get this. Do you remember what Jesus did *immediately* after being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River? He was driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he fasted and prayed for 40 days. I have said many times that the first work of ministry is prayer. That, just like Jesus, after we are baptized, or after we accept the commission to be God's people, we should engage in prayer.

And at the end of this time of fasting and prayer, what happened? Satan showed up and offered Jesus this world and heaven too. Does that sound a little familiar to a crowd who would take him and make him king?

Isn't bread good? Yes. Isn't feeding the hungry good? Yes. So why does Jesus refuse and why, when he did feed people, was he so put off by their calling him king?

The answer lies in the word *agenda.* Something in Jesus recognized that he couldn't meet the needs of so many people who were clamoring after him, without at the same time denying who he was called by the Father to be. In the wilderness after his baptism, Satan tried to transform Jesus into a wonder-worker. Jesus refused. Now, Jesus has given bread and when the grateful crowds attempt to crown him king, Jesus withdraws. When the crowds find him the next day, he rebukes them for caring only about their bellies, for confusing 'blessings with jackpots' as I explained in the sermon on August 6.

Jesus refused to do what the crowd wanted because he didn't have the sense that this is what his Father wanted. All through the Gospels, we continue to see that Jesus does the will of the Father. He says repeatedly that he does not do his own will - that he does not follow his own agenda - but follows the agenda of the Father. I believe and continue to teach that Jesus did not have the entire game plan laid out for him ahead of time, but that like any human being, he went to the Father in prayer, and the Holy Spirit guided his steps, one step at a time. Jesus was tenacious in a way few of us can master, about seeking intimacy with the Father through prayer, and letting the agenda of the Father dictate his words and actions.

We come to church to seek comfort, to seek answers, to receive guidance, to get some insight into our struggles. We come here asking the question, 'what's in Christianity for me?' It's a good question but the answer is broad and wide and deep and sometimes hard to fathom. We can see ourselves in this John 6 crowd, and so the story seems at first to be about us too. But before it's done we see it's really a story about Jesus. We come to church thinking mostly about ourselves, but then the Scripture talks mostly about God.

That's why I think this story is told to us. When will we ever learn? Christianity, following Jesus, is not merely another helpful means of helping us get what we want. Rather, following Jesus is the means whereby God gets what God wants. The

implication in all this is that, in truth, we don't know what we want - we don't know what we *need* before we meet Jesus Christ.

As if I wouldn't, let me be direct here - and honest. I don't know how to attract people to the Good News of Jesus Christ by appealing to your essentially selfish needs. There are a large number of pastors who are very successful in this, creating an excess of ministries and programs that make their churches the hot and exciting place to be. After everybody is made happy and comfortable, after they are well-fed, these pastors then get back to the Scriptures and offer the unselfish gospel of Jesus, and a lot of their people experience a kind of religious bait-and-switch. But, as I said, I don't know how to do that. The Gospel of Jesus Christ and this church isn't about meeting your needs. It's about *meeting Jesus*, and about how in that encounter, you will discover from Jesus what your needs really are.

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